

**Panel 8:** Representing Dalitism in 'contemporary India: Beyond the discourse of Victimhood'

**Convener:** Dr. Edward A. Rodrigues, Department of Sociology, University of Mumbai

**Abstract:** At a critical moment in their sharpening differences over the issue of untouchability and Caste society in India, both Ambedkar and Gandhi were drawn into a dispute of far reaching consequences for India's dalit population. While Ambedkar espoused the case for the annihilation of Caste, Gandhi was more inclined to seek the adaptation of the caste system centered on the upliftment of the untouchables. Quite clearly, these were perspectives with radically different emphasis. Approaches to the transformation of modern Indian society persistently reflect this difference. . Thus for instance Sociology in India has consistently shied away from dealing with caste domination or caste annihilation preferring instead to emphasize the adaptive nature of the Caste System. Not surprisingly Dalit strategies for emancipation have in general focused on Dalit upliftment with scant attention paid to the annihilation of the Caste system. Dalits unwittingly find themselves adopting strategies of caste and sub caste mobilizations in order to emancipate themselves from the tyranny of Caste.

In this panel we want to suggest that the notion of 'Victimhood' which has been crucial in shaping strategies of Dalit emancipation has principally functioned to reproduce Caste consciousness rather than its annihilation. Such representations of Victimhood have constantly served as the basis for Dalit mobilization against State and Civil society in India. It is this politics of 'Victimhood' which contributes to the continuing existence of the Caste system and its oppression of the Dalits, notwithstanding the fact that some of them may improve their standard of living. The production and reproduction of Victimhood over the past half century, today constitutes an ideology and practice through which Dalits come to internalize and legitimize their status as 'Victims'. The principal beneficiaries' of such a politics have been the upper castes and those who advocate the continued existence of Caste. By emphasizing victimhood the proponents of Caste have successfully deflected the critical gaze of the Dalit movement away from Caste annihilation ensuring instead that Dalit struggles will always be about Dalits transforming themselves rather than modern Indian society ridding itself of the Caste system.

This panel will seek to shift its focus of the /Dalit movement from its present engagement with 'Victimhood' by considering instead how the proponents of Caste reproduce victimhood within the Dalit movement in Modern India. Beyond Victimhood is an attempt to understand the Dalit movement not through its victims but its oppressors . It aims to do this through a critical engagement with Dalit representations in contemporary India. Such representations whether in politics, literature cultural practice, religious conversions etc. offer the possibility of a critical interrogation of how proponents of Caste have successfully

resisted a public scrutiny of the Caste system by foregrounding Dalit victimhood. Modern Indian society makes it out as if the untouchable is to blame for the problem of untouchability. The objective of this exercise would be to read dalit representation of their experience within their struggles with a view to unmasking the universe of caste oppression that lies concealed behind contemporary India's claims to modernity

**Contact:** [eddierodrigues@gmail.com](mailto:eddierodrigues@gmail.com)